

The Importance of the Hackensack Meadowlands

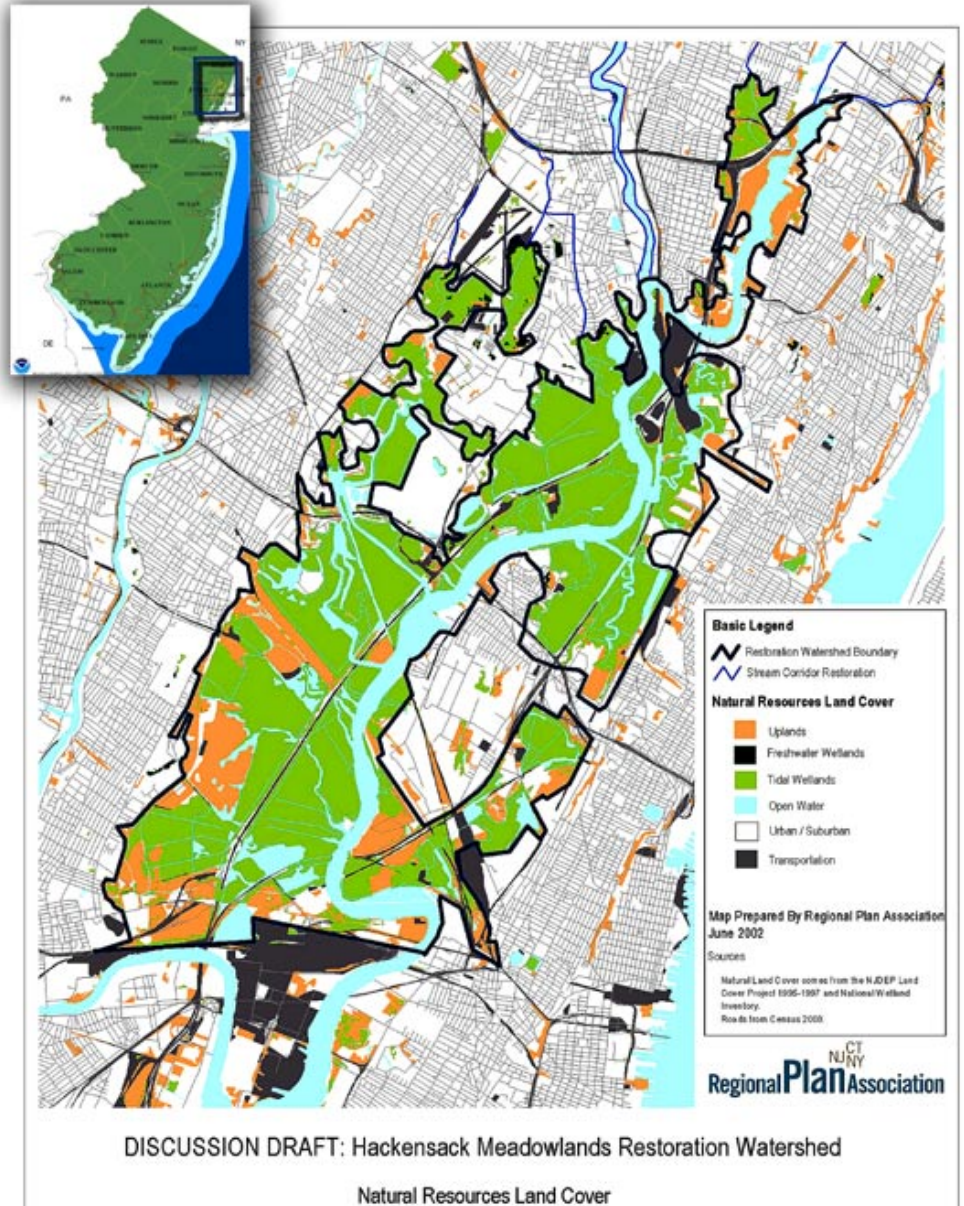
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Over the last five years, a threefold public consensus about the Hudson Raritan Estuary has formed. First, there is now considerable agreement that the estuary's remaining natural habitats should be preserved from development. Second, feeling is strong that we must save not just individual sites, but entire ecosystem complexes. And third, it has become clear that simply preserving the estuary's remaining natural areas from new development is not enough. We must also repair the damage three centuries of intense human development has inflicted on the estuary and restore the ecological richness and variety of the estuary to the greatest extent feasible, given the fact that it is surrounded by 20 million people and a trillion-dollar regional economy.

The importance of the Hackensack Meadowlands to this great threefold vision cannot be overstated. The great bulk of the Hudson Raritan Estuary's remaining littoral is now in one of five ecosystem complexes: Bronx-East River, Jamaica Bay, the Arthur Kill, Raritan Bay and the Hackensack Meadowlands. These areas have been islanded by human development. They cannot grow in size; they can only grow in quality and through reduction of internal fragmentation.

Of these five complexes, the Hackensack Meadowlands has the most potential to enrich the estuary's ecosystems. It is the largest. It offers the most opportunity to eliminate fragmentation. It has the most potential for ecological variety, particularly if the historic hydrodynamics that made it a mixture of freshwater and saltwater marsh and Atlantic white-cedar forest can be restored. Yet it presents the most formidable challenges in terms of its complexity.

Restoring the Hackensack Meadowlands will require far more than the traditional marsh grass replanting. First the land must be acquired, then the hydrology fixed, then toxic sediments addressed, then fragmentation eliminated and buffer zones crafted, then careful changes in vegetation structures designed, all in harmony with the necessary community activities and the road and rail nets that abut and use the Hackensack. Mastering these challenges will provide a template not only for restoring this estuary, but any estuary where urban life and nature hope to coexist.



Thus, the payoff in restoring the Hackensack Meadowlands is immense. Along with New York's Jamaica Bay, the Meadowlands should become one of a set of nature refuges that, embedded in the heart of the ultimate urban metropolis that is the closest thing

to a capital the world has, would be a living demonstration that humans can repair the damage of past misuse and learn to live in true collaboration with nature.